

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 136

EA 019 054

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TITLE Private Schools and Public Funding: Some Reflections upon an English Initiative.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 30p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (67th, San Francisco, CA, April 16-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Access to Education; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Government School Relationship; *National Programs; Political Influences; Political Issues; Politics of Education; *Private School Aid; *Public Support; *School Choice; Secondary Education; *Tuition Grants
IDENTIFIERS *Assisted Places Scheme (England); *England

ABSTRACT

The Assisted Places Scheme introduced by England's Conservative government in 1980 provides for the government to make up the difference between the cost of private secondary school tuition and the amount that eligible students can afford to pay (determined according to a sliding scale based on parent income). As a result, the private schools can be highly selective and students of high ability are guaranteed access to exclusive schools despite financial hardship. The program has caused significant controversy, however, since there are questions about the impact that the plan could have on the quality of education available to those not selected by private schools. Research into the impact of the scheme and its effectiveness in achieving its goals was conducted by gathering data at the national, regional, and individual school levels. National statistics, interviews with school administrators, and interviews with students and their parents provided information. While still being analyzed, the data already suggest that many students at whom the plan was directed may not be being reached, and that many supported students might have attended the same schools without government support. The political forces presenting obstacles to the research are also noted in this report. (PGD)

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PRIVATE SCHOOLS AND PUBLIC FUNDING: SOME REFLECTIONS UPON
AN ENGLISH INITIATIVE.

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Much of the controversy about state aid to private schools has centred on the acceptability of using government money to help maintain schools or school systems that compete with those provided wholly out of public funds. The legitimacy of direct state aid to non-government schools has been at the heart of the issue in Australia, while in the USA the illegality of direct aid to most such institutions has focused argument on the legitimacy of various forms of indirect support. In its introduction of an Assisted Places Scheme in 1980, the British Conservative Administration might seem to have avoided the main issues by its claim to be aiding not the independent schools themselves, but needy individuals who were to be enabled to exercise the same right of choice as is available to those from wealthier backgrounds (1). Those independent schools which are participating in the Scheme remit fees on a sliding scale of parental income for those children whom they select as being academically suitable. They then recover the residue of the fees from Central Government. In the context of current debates in other countries, and of the strong preference of monetarist economic theorists for aiding individuals rather than institutions (2), we feel that a case study of this particular Government initiative may be more useful here than a straightforward contrast between policies being adopted in several countries (3). It may at least demonstrate that the device used by the British Government to evade some of the issues encountered elsewhere does little to

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overcome them. Indeed, we suspect that the issues, if not the specific policies, are remarkably similar in our various countries.

Before proceeding to our case study, it is necessary to clarify some aspects of the English situation. First, we use the term 'English' rather than British because of significant differences between the education systems of England (and Wales), and those of Scotland and Northern Ireland. Secondly, we emphasise that, quite apart from the evident difficulty of distinguishing between the effects of state aid to individuals and to institutions (4), there are recognisable ways in which the British government aids independent schools themselves. For example, it pays the costs of training teachers for both sectors, and it grants 50% relief on rates (or land tax) to the many schools (including all the 'market leaders') which have the status of 'charities' (5). Thirdly, it is important to note that the Assisted Places Scheme is essentially a scholarship 'ladder' for academically able children; those among its advocates who saw it as a pilot experiment for a fully-grown voucher system, or who wanted assistance extended to much broader categories of need (e.g. the need for boarding education), have so far been disappointed. Fourthly, the question of state aid is not directly linked to the question of support for sectarian education, as it is in many other countries. Although many independent schools are religious foundations, and may be chosen by parents for that reason, there are large numbers of Anglican and Roman Catholic schools within the state system because of a series of historical compromises between church and state (6). Finally, it should be borne in mind that, partly because of this incorporation of so many sectarian schools within the state system, less than 7% of secondary-age children are in the independent sector, the majority of

them being at schools which have traditionally been highly selective, both socially and academically (7).

The central justification for the Assisted Places Scheme was that it would make it possible for 'bright children from less affluent homes' to attend independent schools of proven academic worth from which they would otherwise have been excluded by their parents' inability to pay (8). In 1984-5, £25.4 million government money was paid to independent schools to reduce or waive the fees charged to parents of academically eligible children, and to pay certain incidental expenses arising from the taking-up of places. By that fourth year of the Scheme's existence, 17,315 children were participating in the Scheme in 223 of the most prestigious English schools. Their government-assisted presence there was justified as an extension of parental choice, a restoration of academic opportunities to many children who would not be fully 'stretched' in schools which had to cope with a full range of ability, and a protection both for individuals and the nation's resources of talent against the levelling-down effects attributed to comprehensive reorganisation (9). Opponents of the Scheme saw it as an offensive declaration by the Government that the public sector was incapable of providing for very able children, and as a government-sponsored withdrawal of middle-class support from schools so evidently identified as second-best.

Our own initial interest in studying the Scheme lay partly in the relationship between claims made by advocates and critics at the time of its inception, and its actual operation and effects. Some of the predictions were confident, specific, and directly contradictory - for example, that 'able children from our poorest homes' would once again have the opportunity of attending academically-

excellent schools', or that 'a Scheme designed to attract working-class children who would otherwise go to a poor neighbourhood comprehensive may simply attract middle class children who would otherwise go to a good comprehensive' (10). Other issues raised during the controversy have reflected irreconcilable philosophical differences which cannot be subjected to empirical testing. Thus much of the debate expressed predefined positions on the relative claims of freedom and equality to inform the structuring of society. Even if it were possible to reach some conclusions about the extent to which either of these 'goods' was being enhanced by the Scheme, no research could adjudicate between their respective merits. What we have done elsewhere is to locate supporting and opposing arguments within the context of these broader philosophical positions, and within the ideological repertoires of the various political parties; this work is continuing and being revised (11).

Even in its proponents' own terms, however, there are no straightforward ways of investigating how far the Scheme promotes or restricts 'freedom'. It is claimed that the availability of assisted places increases freedom of choice for parents of able children (if not at all for parents of the less intellectually favoured). Yet if there were evidence that its operation reduced standards of provision for other able children who remain within the maintained sector, then the conclusion might well be that there had been an overall reduction in freedom of choice. That example of how empirical and philosophical considerations may come together is most clearly reflected in the basic problem of what empirical effects need to be studied. Advocates of the Scheme have often insisted that the only relevant criteria for judging its success or failure are the benefits it brings to the individual beneficiaries, and that its critics are seeking to subordinate the needs of individuals to the supposed

needs of the system (12). Yet to focus entirely on those who have received assisted places without regard for possible consequences in the public sector would itself be vulnerable to the charge of being a politically-biased restriction of view.

Despite such complications, some claims made by supporters and critics are susceptible to empirical investigation. The most obvious example is the extent to which the Scheme has reached its intended target group; whether it has done so more effectively as it has become better known, and as some participating schools have vigorously publicized the opportunities they claim to offer; and whether it has done so more successfully than the earlier Direct Grant school system, which both aided schools directly and made free places available to parents well able to pay the full fees to an extent regularly deplored within the independent sector itself. Over time, some of its effects can be studied both on the participating schools, and on state primary and secondary schools around them. To what extent, for instance, has it enabled the independent schools to recruit still more academically selective intakes? Given that by far the best predictors of school outcomes are the social and intellectual characteristics of school intakes, that question has considerable significance for the schools' market appeal (13). For as competition increases for university places, and for those high-status occupations which recruit graduates, that appeal is enhanced by a 'lead' in academic output which grew longer during the 1970s - that is, the proportion of sixth-form leavers carrying a clearly stamped passport to higher education (three 'good grades' at GCE Advanced-level) (14). While the private sector needed no rescuing from the prospect of unfilled places in 1981, there had been a significant decline in the academic quality of the intake to some schools during the phasing out of the earlier

Direct Grant system between 1976 and 1981. The Assisted Places Scheme may therefore constitute a timely defence of that lead. Certainly the consequent damage which its 'creaming' effects were predicted to inflict on sixth-form provision in the state sector has been a main source of opposition to it (15). At the point of entry to secondary schools, we can also enquire whether the revival of a fairly substantial 'scholarship' system has brought a return in some primary schools to the kinds of scholarship-coaching produced by the old Eleven-plus examination for places in maintained grammar schools, and whether parents' interest in the Scheme is related to the prevailing pattern of state provision in their areas (for example, whether it is less where maintained grammar schools still survive, or where there are accessible comprehensive schools which have good academic reputations). Finally, and crucially, we are interested in testing the claim that assisted-place pupils will gain tangible benefits (individually or as a group) in relation to their peers in the state sector. This is the crucial question because advocates of the Scheme have insisted that it 'complemented' the state sector by providing academic opportunities difficult to maintain in 'schools catering for the majority', while its critics have argued that it represented an unjustifiable expenditure of public money without any check that the assisted pupils needed to move out of the public sector to obtain those opportunities (16). These have been the considerations shaping our decisions about what evidence to collect. Throughout, however, we have had to be wary of mistaking short-term effects for long-term consequences.

In collecting that evidence, we have worked at three levels - nationally, in selected areas with high concentrations of assisted places, and in individual schools. We have therefore tried to focus down on individual pupils and parents

affected by the Scheme while maintaining in view its broader contexts (17). At the national level, we have made a historical analysis of the relation of the Scheme to previous attempts to link the public and private sectors, and a sociological analysis of its relationship to other aspects of contemporary social policy. There has also been a more detailed study of its origins within the private sector, its appearance as a Conservative Party policy commitment, and its formulation as a workable scheme (in unusually short time) following the Conservative election victory of May 1979. Of particular interest has been the extent to which the Scheme can be 'read' as manifesting some of the main themes in the new educational ideology constructed by the Right during the 1970s, and as a prime example of a positive 'policy preference' rather than as a pragmatic response to problems (18). Given the Scheme's attractions as an inexpensive way of displaying simultaneously the new Government's commitments to preserving academic standards, extending parental choice, and rewarding the 'deserving', it is tempting to see it in this way. In practice, however, there was not universal enthusiasm for it within the Party, and the groundwork for its construction can equally well be seen as having been achieved by a few enthusiastic politicians in close alliance with a well-organised pressure group from within the independent sector.

Summary statistics of the distribution and take-up of assisted places, and the levels of financial support given to parents, are published annually by the Government's Department of Education and Science (DES) and by the Independent Schools Joint Council (ISJC). We have also been given access to more detailed school-by-school statistics by the DES. Nationally, the distribution of places is highly significant in relation to initial claims that priority would be given to inner-city areas without selective maintained schools; that the nature

of local provision in the public sector would be carefully considered in determining allocations to avoid duplication or competition (especially with state grammar schools); and that opportunities for 'real' academic education were again being made available on merit alone. Given the high concentrations (for historical reasons) of elite independent schools in the south of England, and of direct-grant schools in and around the cities of London, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle, an equitable distribution of places around the country was impossible, short of creating new independent schools or enticing far more voluntary-aided grammar schools out of the state sector than actually made that move.

Our local studies, in two northern areas and one southern area, have included urban, suburban and semi-rural catchments. While their choice may have begun with their accessibility to the research team, the most significant factor has obviously been the willingness of schools and LEAs to co-operate in research into a Scheme which has been defended and attacked with a ferocity apparently out of all proportion to its modest scope. We return to this 'opportunity sampling' later in the paper. Within each area, we have interviewed the heads of independent and state secondary schools, senior staff in independent schools who had particular responsibility for selecting assisted-place pupils and monitoring their progress, and the heads of primary schools, some of whom were experiencing pressures to prepare children for the entrance examinations (sometimes despite an explicit Local Authority ban on any co-operation with the Scheme). In independent schools, we have interviewed equal numbers of assisted-place and full fee-paying pupils from the same year groups, using semi-structured interviews which include questions about their home backgrounds, their reasons for coming to the school, their views of the school, their plans

for higher education and for employment, and any contacts they continue to have with friends made at primary school. The same interviews have been conducted with some of their contemporaries in state schools. Where parents have also agreed to be seen, the interviews have been much longer; they extend from pre-coded items on their own (and their parents') education and occupations to open-ended questions about their choice of school, their objectives and strategies in making that choice, and their more general views about educational opportunities and the 'openness' of British society. Here, again, we have talked with parents (or pairs of parents) of assisted place holders and full fee-payers in the independent sector, and with parents whose children are in state schools.

The state schools we have studied were among those which had been available to the assisted-place pupils, might have been attended by them if the Scheme had not existed, and are attended by their former friends from primary school. This component of the research enables us to make detailed comparisons between the characteristics and educational careers of assisted place holders, full fee payers in the same school, and state secondary pupils from the same local areas. There are clearly insuperable objections to comparing the actual careers of pupils with what they 'might have been' in some other school, and they were stated forcibly by several independent school heads at the outset of the research. Nevertheless, it is possible to make systemic comparisons of resources, curriculum and subject choice in schools from the two sectors; indeed, it is difficult to see how such comparisons can be avoided, given those references to rescuing able children from inappropriate or inferior schools which have figured so prominently in the Scheme's justification.

In all this data collection, equal attention has been given to boys and girls. That might have been taken for granted had several major studies of social origins and educational destinations in England not focused entirely on boys, and had the prestige and elite-reproduction functions of boys' 'public' schools not dominated debate about the entire independent sector (19). At least before the sixth form stage, most schools participating in the Scheme are single-sex, and so (within the constraints imposed by schools' willingness or reluctance to take part in the research) we have tried to include equal numbers of girls' schools and girl pupils.

Though the data are still being analysed, and hence our necessary reticence about 'findings', a number of issues have emerged or become more sharply defined in the course of the research. Some of these have resulted from provisional empirical conclusions, others from the continuing national debate about the effects of the Scheme to which we hope our analysis will contribute. Of particular concern to us at present are the social backgrounds of those participating in the Scheme, the extent to which the Scheme itself has been instrumental in their taking up places in independent schools, the effects of their doing so on the life chances of other pupils, the institutional effects of the Scheme on different types of school, local and regional differences in the take-up of places, and the more general question of how the Scheme is changing the systemic relationship between the state and the private sector. There are the issues on which we concentrate in the remainder of this paper.

At the individual level, there have been claims that some pupils are benefiting who could not be held to 'need' assistance in any accepted sense of need (20). Evidence suggests, however, that only a small minority of parents abuse the

Scheme financially. Some of these are able, by clever accountancy, to mislead school bursars much as they mislead the Inland Revenue system. Others raise questions about the appropriateness of parental income as the criterion of eligibility, when some parents qualify for full assistance even though co-habiting with affluent partners and others would otherwise have received assistance from more wealthy members of the child's extended family (usually grand-parents). Far more interesting, in our view, is the social composition of that group which is clearly entitled to assistance within the terms of the Scheme. The frequency of one-parent families within that group is evident in all the available figures. Less obvious, partly because of the way occupations are categorised in those figures, is the possible under-representation of manual working-class parents. In our view, their participation is vital to many claims made in defence of the Scheme at the time of its introduction. If it appears that a high proportion of assisted-place holders come from 'submerged' middle-class backgrounds already well-endowed with cultural capital, then a major justification for withdrawing children from the public sector would be called into question. This would still be so even if many able children from financially modest backgrounds were taking up places, as national statistics clearly indicate is the case. In 1985, for example, 42% of places were awarded to children from families whose 'relevant income' was less than £6,376, and so qualified for full remission of fees; 55% altogether came from families with incomes of less than £8,000. These figures were cited to support the conclusion that the Scheme was indeed reaching those for whom it was intended, the 'largest categories of

beneficiaries' being again 'the unemployed and one-parent families' (21).

It is worth looking more closely at the full range of beneficiaries. Although our own data on the social backgrounds of assisted-place holders have yet to be fully analysed, it is already clear that they will not differ substantially from the findings of Douse, who has been studying the Scheme's operation in different areas from ourselves. On the basis of a questionnaire returned by the heads of 93 participating schools, he makes the following claims about the characteristics of the 7229 assisted place holders in those schools (a figure representing 42% of the total in England in 1984):-

Less than 0.1% were from ethnic minorities
 19% were from homes where the main wage-earner had recently spent a significant time unemployed
 41% were from single-parent families
 32% had at least one parent with graduate or professional qualifications
 20% had a brother or sister who was at, or who had attended, an independent school, and 9% were the sons or daughters of former pupils of the particular responding school (22).

The 199 assisted-place pupils Douse questioned in the six schools he visited served to illustrate his large-scale analysis. There was one Asian girl among them, and only 13 described parental occupations which could be reliably classified as skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled manual work. In contrast, no fewer than 167 cited occupations generally regarded as being 'middle class', and 61 had at least one parent or a sibling with experience of independent schooling. But despite this middle-class 'bias', there were 83 children from single parent families, and 41 from families where the main wage-earner was, or had recently

been, unemployed. From both his general and detailed evidence, Douse concludes that relatively few assisted place holders come from 'unambiguously working-class backgrounds', that many come from single-parent families or from other families where a low income reflects 'unusual' circumstances, and that a large minority are already within what he calls 'the independent school frame of reference' (23).

Publicly, such evidence is not treated as a problem by Government ministers, because the relevant legislation merely states that the Scheme is intended to help 'pupils who might not otherwise...be able to benefit from education at independent schools' (24), while the high proportion of existing place holders receiving full remission of fees (a rather higher percentage than the government itself originally anticipated) is used to support the argument that the Scheme is proving conspicuously successful in directing aid to those who need it. Thus Bob Dunn, the junior minister then responsible for administering it, told the House of Commons in May 1984 that a third of the places in participating schools were being opened up to 'pupils from low-income families who are selected on merit alone', and that the result (of which he was 'proud') was to - 'give children from disadvantaged and poor homes an education that they would not normally receive' (25).

In view of the evidence that was already emerging from the independent schools' own surveys by that time, it is clear that the terms 'disadvantaged' and 'poor' were being used here not only in a rather broader way than is usual within educational discourse, but in a way that actually disguised the fact that the sample contained very few

examples of pupils who fitted the more usual definition of those categories. However, Douse claims that his findings do not 'constitute a criticism of the Scheme' because the legislation which created it was never couched explicitly in terms of reaching out to the 'working class'. He suggests that 'aiding bright youngsters from single-parent homes or from ones in which the main wage-earner is unemployed, even if the family might reasonably be characterised as "middle-class", is certainly not a self-evident misallocation of funds' (26).

Such judgements are more likely to derive from pre-existing philosophical and political preferences than from the evidence. But in our own research, which seeks partly to explore the operation of the scheme in terms of the claims made by its advocates and critics, it is certainly pertinent to ask whether funds are being allocated to the groups originally anticipated. To this extent, Douse's defence of the Scheme minimises the significance of a change in the representation of the typical assisted place pupil within the rhetorics of legitimisation employed by ministers over the years. While there was certainly little reference to any concept of 'class' in the official justifications for the Scheme 1979-81, Parliamentary references being mainly to (for example) 'children from inner urban areas', 'academically-minded children of poor parents' and 'children from deprived backgrounds', there can be little doubt that these phrases conjured up images of working class children for whom opportunities for upward mobility through educational success were being restored. This is particularly clear in a statement by Rhodes Boyson, a junior education minister, at

the time when the first assisted-place pupils were entering their independent schools:-

Once again the boy or girl from an inner city area, where the aspirations and achievements of his (sic) local comprehensive aren't such that he will be stretched the way he should be, can once again join the ladders of social and economic mobility, and to me that's part of an open society. And I'm astonished anybody opposes it (27).

Similarly Mark Carlisle, the Secretary of State for Education at the time when the Scheme was introduced, stressed that he had promoted it as both a scholarship system and as a 'general widening of choice for parents':-

Particularly in my mind always was that in inner-city areas for the children to be able to benefit from the education that was available at such places as King Edward's (Birmingham), Bradford Grammar School, and Manchester Grammar School (28).

There is little evidence in our own sample of assisted place holders that even those children from single parent families or from families where parents are unemployed come from the kinds of material and cultural backgrounds which are conjured up by these images. Though ministers have always been careful to point out that children from inner city areas were only one of the disadvantaged groups which the Scheme might benefit, it is clear that there is some unease among its promoters about their failure to appear in large numbers among its beneficiaries. This is indicated by the fact that, while the numbers eligible to have all or most of their fees remitted can be cited as vindication of the Scheme, the annual publicity exercises mounted by the Independent Schools Information Service and by the DES place particular emphasis on those pupils from manual working class occupations 'mentioned more than

once' in the participating schools' annual returns to the ISJC, or on those pupils from evidently disadvantaged circumstances who are sometimes persuaded to pose for the media alongside an appropriate minister. To this extent, the celebration of the unanticipated consequences of the scheme for the submerged middle classes may not be adequate compensation for its failure to reach its core target group, especially when these consequences were predicted by its critics and denied by its advocates at the time of its launch.

The claim that the Scheme is reaching a group that might otherwise not have received the same standard of education also needs to be subjected to careful scrutiny. Certainly there was little suggestion in the public debates that a prime purpose of the Scheme was to give assisted places to pupils who would have attended the same schools without them. Yet the heads who responded to Douse's questionnaire estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of assisted pupils would have attended their schools anyway, while, among the pupils in his smaller sample, 46 percent believed that they would have attended an independent school of some sort had the Scheme not existed. For these pupils, it is difficult to argue that the Scheme has significantly widened choice, while the justification for subsidising the choice they had anyway made is not self-evident in a period of severe restraint on public expenditure. Nevertheless, the official view has been that a widening of choice for at least the majority of assisted-place pupils is to be welcomed as an extension of freedom valuable for its own sake, and because it both enhances opportunity for these particular pupils and exerts an additional competitive pressure on state schools to improve their own

standards. These are the claims upon which it is most important and most difficult to adjudicate.

Our interviews with parents of assisted place holders certainly indicate that, by and large, they believe that their children are getting a better education than that available to them in the public sector. They feel this as strongly as those parents who pay full fees (29). State school parents were less likely to hold this view, although some parents of state school pupils, especially in working-class areas, also expressed belief in the superiority of independent schools. Sometimes this was because of the better facilities and teachers attributed to them, but more often it was because of their social selectiveness and the self-confidence which they were believed to instill. The complex relationships between parents' own educational experiences, their ambitions for their children, and the opportunities they perceive as being offered by schools of different kinds are the focus of much of our current analysis of parental interviews. What is already apparent is the extent to which many parents of assisted-place and full fee-paying pupils in schools which formerly had Direct Grant status see those schools primarily, even entirely, as grammar schools. It is their academic selectiveness, not their independence or (at least directly) their social exclusiveness, which is highly valued.

We now turn from these parental perceptions to the corresponding assumptions made by the architects and advocates of the Assisted Places Scheme about the opportunities which it would make more widely available. Much of the momentum behind the Scheme came from belief in

the distinctive academic education offered by good grammar schools, and from equally entrenched doubts about the capacity of some comprehensive schools, or even of any comprehensive school, to really extend very able children. Both belief and doubt rest on a presumed association between academically-selective schools and academic achievement which is by no means conclusively demonstrated in the literature (30). The assumptions are that high academic standards are only safe in grammar schools, which therefore offer 'poor but able' children opportunities which comprehensive re-organisation would deny them. Very able children from any background, but especially those from homes unable to provide much of an educational or cultural 'inheritance', 'will perform more effectively in the special, the hothouse, atmosphere of the high academic school' (31). Extending access to such schools is therefore seen as making 'a real contribution to social mobility', to that open society to which Rhodes Boyson referred, while also reinforcing the distinctive function of independent schools, which is to 'complement' the public sector by offering a quality of provision hardly available within it (32).

Contrary claims have been alluded to already - notably, that there is no firm evidence that comprehensive schools cannot cater for the full range of ability, but that their chances of doing so are significantly diminished (especially at the sixth-form stage) by the 'pirating of scholastic talent' which the Assisted Places Scheme is said to have encouraged (33). We can do no more here than indicate some of the evidence which might be relevant to these claims and counter-claims. Nationally, the take-up of assisted places has risen from 77% in the

Scheme's first year to 92% in 1985. Yet there are individual schools where unfilled places have brought a reduction in their allocations, and areas of the country where the take-up is generally lower than might be expected of such apparent bargains. Nor are these exclusively affluent areas where the 'pool' of financially eligible parents might also be low. One would expect the Scheme to have least appeal where state schools are seen to be doing a relatively good job. We are therefore looking with particular interest at those state schools which do seem to be both competent and confident in nurturing the talent of academically able pupils and we are exploring how far they do actually meet the aspirations of those pupils who, in other areas, might be tempted into the independent sector. How far such schools have been encouraged to do an even better job by the existence of the Scheme itself is doubtful, given the high proportion of assisted-place pupils who would not have considered a state school anyway, and the possibility (to which we have already referred) that the Scheme may be increasing the academic selectivity of independent schools, and so enhancing their 'results', beyond what would have been attainable through the operation of 'pure' market forces. This, in turn, could itself have long term consequences for the capacity of state schools to compete with them.

It seems, then, that even a policy of aiding individuals to attend independent schools, rather than giving direct aid to those schools, has the potential to bring about systemic changes in the relationship between state and private education. Indeed, it has been argued that this sponsored withdrawal from state schools so clearly labelled as

being second-best is only part of a planned large-scale intrusion of private provision into the state sector (34). Certainly, some members of the Government have urged more radical ventures in extending parental choice. Boyson, for example, has been quoted as saying :

'If choice is a good thing and variety a good thing, which I obviously believe it is, then it should be open not only to academically able children but to all children... That is why I moved towards the voucher system or contracting out or specialist schools in the long term, without denying the virtues of the assisted places scheme. But politically and philosophically I must move along those lines myself' (35).

In such pronouncements, it is possible to detect the preparation of the ground for a re-definition of the Assisted Places Scheme as the precursor of a radical new policy of privatization rather than a 'natural' extension of the traditional scholarship ladder. Yet, there has remained a degree of diffidence in government circles about such a re-definition, a diffidence that persisted through the 1983 election campaign and has continued ever since (36). Voucher experiments, an expansion of the Assisted Places Scheme, and even the return of direct grant schools (37), are all floated from time to time as possibilities by a Government which remains explicitly committed in its social policies to 'reduce the share of national resources taken by the public sector' (38). Meanwhile, the political climate has certainly become much more favourable to the private education sector during the past few years. This is because independent schools have seemed to be models of good practice by many on the Right; they are seen as upholding traditional standards of behaviour and academic achievement, as being far more accountable to parents and responsive to market forces, and as providing an essential defence against state monopoly of educational

provision (39). From other political perspectives, there is a fear that encouragement of the private sector, and the presentation of entry to independent schools as a legitimate aspiration for all, could lead to state provision becoming little more than a 'safety-net' of elementary education for those families unable or unwilling to compete in the market (40).

Speculation of this nature can itself have a powerful backwash effect throughout public sector provision and help foster a climate in which a more full-blown attempt at privatisation could become a real possibility should the balance of forces within the Conservative party change still further and wider support seem more attainable. Such a development would be likely to have particularly dire consequences for those living in the inner cities for, not only would they be unable to attain access to educational and welfare services beyond a bare minimum provided by the state, they would increasingly become the only groups receiving this form of public provision. While, in those circumstances, a few children might 'escape' from the inner cities into the middle classes via assisted places, they would be relatively few on present evidence and those remaining would, in turn, lack even present levels of middle class support in their efforts to improve the quality of state provision.

Even though such speculation gains some credence from our observations of the limited effects of Assisted Places Scheme to date, it has to be recognised that the Scheme remains the most tangible expression of the present Government's policy 'preferences' in education to date, and that 'logical' next steps predicted at its inception have not yet

materialised into legislation. The Scheme has therefore had only marginal effects so far on the education system as a whole. This illustrates the difficulty of seeking to inform future policy with research of the kind we are undertaking. As soon as we try to interpret our data for this purpose, we are forced, to an even greater extent than studies like Coleman et al (41), to make informed guesses about the effects of future policies on the basis of evidence collected from a system in which those policies have hardly taken root. Any interpretation is therefore likely to be more than usually contentious. It is this which contributes to the intensely political nature of research in this field and it helps to explain the concern of others to control both the researchers' access to data and their use of findings. In many ways, this issue has been the sub-text of our research programme and one which, at times, has become our major pre-occupation. It is therefore perhaps fitting that we should conclude this paper with some observations on the political and methodological difficulties of undertaking research on the public funding of private schools.

The political sensitivity of research in this field made our original application for funds something of a source of embarrassment to the Social Science Research Council, at a time when it was the object of close political scrutiny at that time. This contributed to a delay in funding and to the attachment of some unusual conditions to the award itself (42). Once the early problems of securing funding had been overcome, the negotiation of access became an enduring preoccupation of the research team. A controversial policy innovation of this kind

engenders such loyalty and hostility that its gatekeepers are unusually inclined to doubt whether any research can be impartial and unusually concerned to discover the views of the researchers themselves. In some independent schools, however, the grounds for refusing co-operation have been not so much the politically sensitive nature of the Scheme but rather what is perceived as the impossibility of any systematic comparison of schools or types of schools in the opportunities they offer. The controversy surrounding attempts to compare the effectiveness of selective and non-selective schools might well seem to support this scepticism. However, it seems to us a position difficult to justify in principle in the context of a publicly funded Scheme the essential defence of which is that it offers opportunities to able pupils in schools with established academic reputations which they would be unlikely to find within a comprehensively reorganised public sector. Much more readily understandable is the unwillingness of some heads to allow any enquiry which might seem to make assisted place pupils an object of special attention and so hamper their equal treatment.

Other anxieties have emerged more or less intensely at different stages of the research. Many advocates of the Scheme are rightly concerned about the danger of drawing conclusions from short-term evidence. We have tried to be sensitive to this concern, for example by excluding from detailed study the first cohort of pupils to enter the Scheme. We have also undertaken to monitor the the progress of the Scheme, and of the pupils involved in it, beyond the four years of ESRC funding. Concern that our findings might be used prematurely or out of context for politically motivated purposes, was an especially sensitive issue

during the early years of the Scheme, when the possibility of a Labour election victory put its immediate future in jeopardy. An important reason why independent schools themselves became more willing to cooperate as time went on was their renewed self confidence in the aftermath of the landslide victory by the Conservatives in the 1983 General Election.

In some ways, it was the local education authorities and their schools that posed the more formidable barriers to the investigation. The fact that the Scheme is so protected from LEA intervention, together with the total opposition to it displayed by most Labour controlled authorities, made some of the negotiations extremely difficult. To some LEAs, research into how the Scheme works was seen as implying support for it or, at best, giving publicity to something which they would prefer to have seen ignored. One authority made this explicit in its refusal to cooperate by saying that since 'it is opposed to the assisted Places Scheme, it sees no reason why it should devote time to research into the scheme' (43). However, we ourselves would question whether liking or disliking a policy is a good reason for ignoring it, or for simply assuming its effects.

There were times, of course, when to be viewed suspiciously from one side proved helpful in gaining access to the other. But in general, it has proved difficult to maintain a non-partisan stance across a variety of contexts where the participants were keen to elicit our views. In the early stages of the research, it was relatively easy to present our own reflections as merely lay opinion, irrelevant to the exercise in which

we were engaged. Increasingly, however, our views have been influenced by working on the research data and thus they have been increasingly sought as evidence by the Scheme's advocates and critics. The research team has never adopted the classic positivistic stance of refusing to discuss the project with informants, though to some extent we have been protected by a requirement from our funding body that we should not release any findings during the lifetime of the project. We have not therefore had to face as yet many of the dilemmas experienced by those engaged in action research. Now, however, as we come to the end of our period of funding in a situation where the Scheme remains a live political issue, we will have to confront these questions head on and consider the role of our own research in influencing policy. We suspect therefore that we shall learn a great more about the politics of research in this sensitive field in the months to come ! We trust that the further analysis and publication of our data will nevertheless help to illuminate some of the policy issues that have been the concern of this symposium.

Notes and References.

- 1 In using the term 'independent' to refer to non-government schools, we realise that critics of such schools usually prefer the labels 'private', or even 'commercial'; for example, in the Labour Party's Discussion Document Private Schools (1980), and in A.H. Halsey, 'Democracy in education', *New Society* 28 May, 1981. We also accept that to establish the term 'independent', with its many favourable connotations, as the normal usage has been a considerable public relations victory for the schools themselves. Nevertheless, there are technical objections to the term private when applied to sorts of schools involved in the Assisted Places Scheme.
- 2 See M. Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom*, University of Chicago Press, p. 100. See also A.Seldon, *The Riddle of the Voucher*, Hobart Press, 1986.
- 3 Our invitation to contribute to this symposium, however, arose from a comparative study - A. Edwards, J. Fitz and G. Whitty, 'Private schools and public funding: a comparison of recent policies in England and Australia', *Comparative Education*, 21(1) 1985, 29-45.
- 4 See Edwards, Fitz and Whitty, *op. cit.*
- 5 In its statement to the House of Commons Select Committee enquiring into charitable status, the Independent Schools Joint Committee (ISJC) estimated the total value of the benefits of charitable status at 5-10% of fee income. For a discussion of that status and its legal defences, see B. Salter and T. Tapper, *Power and Policy in Education*, Falmer Press 1985, pp. 71-95.
- 6 See M. Cruikshank, *Church and State in English Education*, Macmillan 1963, *espec.* pp. 137-178.
- 7 The fullest account of the selectiveness of the sector is contained in the two Reports of the Public Schools Commission (1968 and 1970), and in the statistical volumes which accompanied them. For a more recent and condensed description, see A.Halsey, A. Heath and J. Ridge, 'The political arithmetic of public schools', in G. Walford (ed) *British Public Schools: Policy and Practice*, Falmer Press 1984, pp. 9-44.
- 8 Statement by the Secretary of State, Mark Carlisle, introducing the 1979 Education Bill.
- 9 The debate surrounding the Scheme's introduction is analysed in A.Edwards, M. Fulbrook and G. Whitty, 'The state and the independent sector: policies, ideologies and theories', in L. Barton and S. Walker (eds) *Social Crisis and Educational Research*, Croom Helm 1984, pp.118-150
- 10 The first prediction was made by a junior Education minister, Rhodes Boyson, writing in the *Daily Mail* 25 June, 1981; the second was quoted in an editorial in *Conference*, a journal for independent schools heads, February 1982.

- 11 For the early stages of this analysis, see Edwards, Fulbrook and Whitty, *op.cit.*
- 12 As another editorial in Conference insisted (February 1983), the purpose of the Scheme was not to assist schools, but individual children 'who need help'
- 13 For useful discussion of British evidence, see J. Gray, 'A competitive edge: examination results and the probable limits of secondary school effectiveness' *Educational Review*, 33(1) 1981, pp. 25-35; and J. Gray, D. Jesson and B. Jones, 'Predicting differences in examination results between LEAs: does school organisation matter?' *Oxford Review of Education*, 10(1) 1984, pp. 45-68.
- 14 This particular 'lead in academic output' is considered in Halsey et al, *op.cit.*, pp. 23-27.
- 15 In recognition of that danger, or at least of widespread demands to curtail it, LEAs were initially given the right to veto the taking up of assisted places at sixteen-plus where the consequent moves from state schools could be shown as damaging to their own post-sixteen provision. Because of what the Government described as overuse (and 'prejudiced' use) of this veto, the right was removed in 1983.
- 16 The first claim is made clearly in a publication by the Independent Schools Information Service (ISIS) in 1981, *The Case for Collaboration*. A prominent exponent of the counter-argument, and from within the private sector, has been the head of Westminster School, John Rae; see his book, *The Public School Revolution*, Faber 1981, pp. 178-183.
- 17 In doing so, we follow the example set in R. Connell et al, *Making the Difference: Schools, Families and Social Division*, Allen and Unwin 1983
- 18 It is seen in that light by R. Dale in 'Thatcherism and education', in J. Ahier and M. Flude (eds) *Contemporary Education Policy*, Croom Helm 1983.
- 19 The most conspicuous example was A. Halsey et al, *Origins and Destinations*, Oxford University Press 1980. Irene Fox's study of parents' motives for using private schools also concentrated entirely on boys - *Private Schools and Public Issues*, Macmillan 1985. There is little mention of private education for girls in either Salter and Tapper *op.cit.* 1985, or in Clive Griggs, *Private Education in Britain*, Falmer Press 1985.
- 20 Press reports have often concentrated on this aspect of the Scheme.
- 21 These figures, and the reference to beneficiaries, come from the 1985 survey issued by ISJC in December 1985.
- 22 M. Douse, 'The background of assisted places scheme students', *Educational Studies*, 11(3) 1985, pp. 211-217.
- 23 Douse, *op.cit.* p.217

- 24 Education Act, 1980.
- 25 Hansard, 6 December 1983 and 15 May 1984.
- 26 Douse op.cit. p.216
- 27 Interviewed on the London Weekend Television programme 'Starting Out', 11 September 1981.
- 28 Interviewed by us, 16 November 1982.
- 29 For a full account of parental perceptions of the advantages procured through private education, see Irene Fox op.cit. 1985 and her chapter 'The demand for a public school education: a crisis of confidence in comprehensive schooling', in G. Walford op.cit.
- 30 The best-known British conflict over the 'facts' is between two almost simultaneously published reports - J. Marks et al, Standards in English Schools, National Council for Educational Standards 1983, and J. Steedman, Examination Results in Selective and Non-Selective Schools, National Children's Bureau 1983. For critical reviews of that conflict, see J. Gray op.cit, and Gray et al, op.cit.
- 31 Stuart Sexton, political adviser to Mark Carlisle and to the present Secretary of State, interviewed by us 2 February 1984. Sexton was the politician most actively and continuously involved in the construction of the Assisted Places Scheme. Belief in the necessity of academic selection is evident throughout the four volumes of Black Papers published 1969-75, which did a great deal to launch the counter-attack against the 'liberal-left consensus'. See also R. Boyson, The Crisis in Education, Woburn Press 1975; Conservative Central Office, Restoring Direct-Grant Schools, 1977; C. Cox and J. Marks (eds) The Right to Learn, Centre for Policy Studies, 1981.
- 32 That 'complementary' relationship is strongly argued in the ISIS pamphlet The Case for Collaboration, 1981.
- 33 This comment by Neil Kinnock, then Labour's 'Shadow' minister of education (Guardian 29 September 1979) has been a consistent theme in Labour opposition to the Scheme. When the Party's National Executive wrote to the heads of participating schools in December 1981 warning them that the next Labour Government would abolish the Scheme immediately, it referred to them as a 'gang of poachers'.
- 34 R. Pring, 'Privatisation', Where No.186, March 1983, pp. 9-14
- 35 Quoted in T. Albert, 'The cheapest way to help the brightest and best', Guardian, 23 November 1982.
- 36 For example, even as her Education minister, Sir Keith Joseph, was reluctantly admitting that a radical transformation of the education system through a voucher scheme was 'off the agenda' (BBC Radio 4, 'Tuesday Call' 16 July 1985), Mrs Thatcher was saying that she might 'have another go at it' (TV Channel 4 'Diverse Reports' 17 July

1985). See also Times Educational Supplement, 7 March 1986.

- 37 The continuing ambitions of Mrs Thatcher's right wing supporters in these directions have inspired a number of recent press leaks about future policy initiatives. See Times Educational Supplement, 28 February 1986 and Financial Times, 3 March 1986.
- 38 Sir Keith Joseph's speech to the 1984 North of England Education Conference, printed in Oxford Review of Education 10(2) 1984, pp.137-46.
- 39 See Edwards et al, op.cit. and Salter and Tapper, op.cit.
- 40 See R. Pring, op.cit.
- 41 J. Coleman, T. Hoffer, and S. Kilgore, High School Achievement : Public, Catholic and Other Private Schools Compared, Basic Books, 1982.
- 42 It was unusual for a project at this level of funding to have a steering committee attached to it. One of the functions of this committee was to scrutinise project publications and advise the research team on ways of avoiding the premature disclosure of 'findings' and their use for politically partisan purposes.
- 43 Letter from Inner London Education Authority.